

1523

1523

La R 197

Sermon preached by Mr. J. Raven at Shaw's Corner, Redhill
on Sunday evening, March 11th, 1951.

"Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." 2 Cor. 3. 2 & 3

"Ye are our epistle, written in our hearts". What a wonderful thing, what a sweet and sacred thing is the union and fellowship that exists between the servants of the living God and people to whom the Lord has made their ministry a blessing! In some cases the quickening and converting word is spoken by their lips, in other cases it is the confirming word which is spoken. There is indeed something very sacred and very sweet about the union and fellowship that exists in such cases. "Ye are our epistle written in our hearts". Bunyan tells us of the peculiar feeling of affectionate interest he had in those people to whom his ministry had been made a blessing. As he looked out over the countryside and his eye rested upon one village after another he thought of souls in those villages who had been quickened from death into life by means of his ministry and his heart burned with love to them, and with anxious desire for their spiritual well-being, and being the man of God that he was, he was much given to prayer on their behalf. O what a man of prayer Bunyan was, and every true minister of Jesus Christ will be no stranger to wrestling prayer on behalf of those who sit under his ministry.

"Ye are our epistle written in our hearts". There will be peculiar exercises in the heart of a true minister of Jesus Christ. He will have people laid upon his heart, sometimes before their conversion, and he wrestles with God for them, he seeks their spiritual good, the salvation of their souls. And in this sense the ministers of Jesus Christ are called labourers. It is a labour; they labour in prayer, in fervent prayer, for those whose cases are thus laid upon their hearts, and where they see true tokens of a work of grace, when they see that which raises up hope within them that the work of grace is begun in some sinner's heart, with what affection, with what interest and with what prayerfulness do they watch over it. How very earnestly they watch for further signs in confirmation that the work is indeed of God! And it is true of a real minister of Christ that as he cannot be satisfied with superficial work in his own case, he cannot be satisfied with superficial work in the cases of other people. He wants it to be a genuine work of grace, he wants it to be the work of the Spirit of God, he wants it to be such a work as will have the Lord's own seal upon it, such work as

the apostle saw and rejoiced in in those Philippian saints to whom he said, "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ".

"Ye are our epistle written in our hearts". Also there is this. As a minister of Jesus Christ hears from the lips of one and another something concerning their souls' cases, something concerning their exercises, their afflictions, their fears, their sense of depravity and awful destitution, his heart rejoices. He loves to hear these complaints that come from the lips of poor exercised people, these expressions of deep dissatisfaction with themselves. It is evidence that they have received the sentence of death in themselves that they should not trust in themselves and as the minister sees these things in sinners' hearts, he does rejoice, whereas if he sees in them or hears from them that which suggests that they are getting upon their stilts, that they are cherishing a proud confidence, pharisaical and legal hopes, that they are resting on something short of Jesus Christ, this fills his heart with sad anxiety. O how he longs to see them brought into the dust, stripped of all their fair pretensions and brought down to absolute nothingness in their feelings before the Lord. Then when he hears from one or another something of the delivering mercy of God, something of a manifestation of Jesus Christ to their hearts, how that gladdens him, because it is what a true minister will look for, the manifestation of Jesus Christ. The apostle, you know, longed to see people espoused to Jesus Christ, and so it is with every true minister. He wants people not to be attached to his own person but to be attached to Jesus Christ, manifestly betrothed to Christ, made willing by the grace of God to close in with Christ, to approve of His great salvation, to place all their hopes upon His precious atoning blood and His everlasting righteousness, and when he finds a poor soul under some heart-warming impressions of the love of Christ how his heart does rejoice to see it. It is what a true minister will be after for himself, just as the apostle said, "That I may win Christ....that I may know Him", so that will be his goal, to win Christ, to know Christ, to know more of Him and to go on to know Him; there will be an intense hunger and thirst for Christ in his heart.

I met with one man, a professed minister of Jesus Christ, who could talk, and talk very freely of his opinions as to how the Lord dealt with His people; he had it all very pat on his lips how the Lord deals thus and thus with his people, but when pressed to give some account of what the Lord had done for him, and whether he knew anything at all of a revelation of Jesus Christ to his own soul, he could say nothing, could give no satisfaction. One does not want to despise the day of small

things, or to despise people who fear God, because of some defect in their faith or knowledge, for all of us are defective more or less in faith, in knowledge, in love and in every grace, but when a man professes to be a minister of Jesus Christ, to be a guide of others to Jesus Christ, one does expect him to know something at any rate of personal contact with the Lord Jesus. If this is lacking, and if a man is satisfied with the lack, it shows him to be seriously unfit for the office of a gospel minister. It was not so with the Apostle Paul. "Ye are our epistle written in our hearts" and as he himself was pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, leaving things which were behind and reaching forward to the things that were before, so his ministry was continually a stirring-up ministry, a ministry which was used of God for the stirring up of people to more and more earnestness in seeking after the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. "Ye are our epistle written in our hearts",- he sought their welfare - "written in our hearts, known and read of all men". Not only had he this evidence in his own heart with regard to them, but they gave outward evidence of the reality of their faith - theirs was a faith which worked. There was the work of faith and labour of love, and if there is true faith in any poor sinner's heart there will be the work of faith, and where there is faith there is sure to be love attending it, and there will be the labour of love.

It is by reason of this work of faith and labour of love that they are "known and read of all men", as living epistles of Jesus Christ. O what do people say about us? about those of us who make a profession of the Lord's Name? What do people say about us? What do the people we live with say about us? What do our neighbours say about us? What do our fellow work-people say about us, the people we do business with, what do they say about us? What did Daniel's enemies have to say about him? "We can find no fault in him except as touching the law of his God". They realised the utter hopelessness of finding any fault in godly Daniel unless they found it touching the law of his God. Somebody wrote a few very telling lines:

"You are living a gospel, a chapter each day,
In the things that you do, and the things that you say;
Men mark how you live and they see what you do,
Say, what is the gospel according to you?"

"Known and read of all men". The church of God is described by the Apostle Paul as the "pillar and ground of the truth", a pillar on which the truth is displayed, just as public notices used to be displayed on pillars in eastern lands for people to read as they passed by. The church of God is the pillar upon which God has inscribed His truth, the

truth that is according to godliness, and also the church of God is the ground of the truth. God has established His truth in His church and the church of God is His witness in the earth, as He says, "Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord of Hosts". "Known and read of all men; forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistles of Christ", "ye are manifestly declared to be the epistles of Christ". Of course an epistle, to put it very simply, consists of certain writing. It means this, that certain things are written in the hearts and consciences of these people and they are written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. And what is written? Well, there are some very solemn things written upon the hearts and consciences of those with whom God deals. For instance, there are written upon the heart and conscience very solemn testimonies with regard to that God with whom they have to do. It is written deeply, indelibly, upon their hearts and consciences that He with whom they have to do is the most Holy, who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, that He abhors evil, that He cannot look upon iniquity save with abhorrence. Then He is a God of judgment, He is just, He is holy, These things are, so to speak, burned into the consciences of those with whom the Holy Spirit takes a dealing, they are written indelibly there. "O", says the poor sinner, "I have to do with God. All that I have ever done is before His holy eye. I am a sinner, a great sinner in His sight."

Do we know anything of such writing being traced indelibly upon our hearts and consciences? Are we made to feel our fallen condition, are we brought face to face with our sinful hearts and our sinful lives, with our dreadful debt of guilt? Such things as these the Spirit of God writes upon the conscience and upon the heart, and He says in effect, "Thine's alas a lost condition". Sinner, there is no hope for you in self, no good deeds of yours can save you, not your tears, not repentance, not anything that you can do can save your soul. Yours is an utterly lost condition. I say, very solemn is this writing, but O the mercy of it, for a poor soul to be so convinced of his sin as to be delivered from the pollution that naturally it cleaves to, the delusive hope of being justified on the ground of any righteousness of its own. The Lord writes death upon everything of the creature. We receive the "sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God that raiseth the dead".

Then there is another thing that is written upon the heart and conscience, and that is, that Christ and Christ alone can save. It is a wonderful thing when the Holy Spirit begins to testify to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ; it is as if the sinner had never heard of the

thing before, that Jesus is a Saviour. He has heard it maybe, he has held the notion that Christ is a Saviour, but it is as if he had never heard it. It has never come home to him as it now comes home to him in the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is the only Saviour, that He is the Friend of sinners, that "this Man receiveth sinners and eateth with them", that He came into the world to die for the ungodly, to give His life a ransom for many, a ransom for sinners. "He shall save His people from their sins". Ah, this is a very precious thing that the Holy Ghost will write indelibly upon the heart and conscience of those with whom He deals, and His whole dealing with the sinner will be to shut that sinner up to Jesus Christ, convince him that there is no hope and no help for him except in the Christ of God.

"Sick sinner, expect no balm but Christ's blood:
Thy own works reject, the bad and the good:"

Then the blessed Spirit of God goes on with His writing. There are many ups and downs, of course, in the experience of the sinner that is under divine teaching, as Mr. Hart says,

"Sometimes we seem to gain
Great lengths of ground by day;
But find, alas! when night comes on,
We quite mistook the way."

and so it is "up and down" work, and sometimes there is a springing up of hope, sometimes darkness envelops the soul, sometimes it seems to a man as if there is not a spark of life in his soul, not a particle of grace, not a beam of light, all is dark. Then again, under the influence perhaps, of a word of Scripture spoken to his heart and conscience, there is a ray of light shining in the darkness and he can say, "Therefore have I hope". But the Spirit of God in all his dealings is more and more making Christ to be the one thing needful, as He leads the man more and more to ponder the ruin of his case, leads him up and down, so to speak, in the valley of dry bones, so that he may be convinced that he is very, very dry. Humanly speaking, it is impossible for those bones to live, but all that is to shut the man up to the grace and power of God that raiseth the dead. O, what a high esteem such a sinner will entertain of Jesus Christ! Do you know what it is to entertain a high esteem of Him? so that you feel, 'If I could but get Christ in my heart, if I could but be assured of my interest in His love and blood, happy should I be.' You have no question about His power to save, but will He save you? You know that He is full of compassion, but will He compassionate your case? You know how He stooped upon earth very low to save poor sinners, but will He save you? 'Am I interested in His doing and dying?' And with all this the soul confesses such a high esteem of Christ. 'If I may but possess Christ, if I may but get to His feet, if

I could but get a touch from that good Physician for the healing of my soul. And so the man is at a point about this, that Christ is all he wants, that he must have Christ or perish.

Well, such things as these are indelibly written upon the heart and conscience. There may not always be the same lively sense of things, but there will be revivings of the sense of them. It may be, as the poet says,

"Sometimes I follow after God;
Sometimes I carelessly retreat."

but the Spirit of God, notwithstanding all the tos and fros of the soul, will carry on His work and eventually lead the soul to Christ to find rest in Him. And then what sweet writing it is when the Spirit comes in with His own gracious, powerful witness of the soul's interest in Christ, enabling him to say,

"Now I have found the ground wherein
My anchor, hope, shall firm remain,
The wounds of Jesus, for my sin
Before the world's foundation slain".

It is wonderful how He does it suddenly sometimes, unexpectedly, one says,

"I looked for hell, He gave me heaven".

Sometimes when things seem to be at the darkest pass, the Lord will break in with a discovery of Jesus Christ that lifts up the soul, and brings it peace and satisfaction, and enables it to say as I have just repeated,

"Now I have found the ground wherein
My anchor, hope, shall firm remain".

The man perhaps is pleading with the Lord for pardon. Suddenly there comes into his conscience the assurance of forgiveness for Christ's sake, and instead of praying for pardon he has to bless the Lord for His forgiving love, and say, in the words of the poet,

"I'll lay me down, and sweetly sleep,
For I have peace with God".

Such things as these are written upon the heart by the Holy Spirit. It is He who takes of the things of Christ and reveals them and He is always doing this more or less in the heart of a believer. He is always bringing man down that He may exalt Christ. If you are under the gracious teaching of the Spirit of God you will know the truth of what I now state, that there is a continual pulling down of self, laying self in the dust, that Christ may be all and in all, a making the soul to feel its own utter destitution of everything that is good and spiritual and holy, that he may know Christ is made unto him wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood". "Written not with ink, but with the Spirit

of the living God". O what a mercy to have a Holy Ghost religion, a religion that has the Lord's own seal upon it, and that will not leave the man speechless in the last day, like the man who had not on a wedding garment. I fear there are numbers of people whose religion will leave them speechless in the last day, will leave them covered with shame and confusion and that for ever and ever. The Lord grant that you and I may not be among them. Nothing but His mighty grace can save us from being among such, because we have everything in us to lead us to be satisfied to be among them, but if the Lord deals with us in mercy we shall want a better portion, that is of the Spirit of the living God. The Apostle says, "where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty", and the Spirit of God leads poor people who know what bondage is, who know what legal travail is, who "toil the precept to obey and toil without success", into sweet liberty, the liberty wherewith Christ makes His people free. He opens to them the blessed truth of that word in the epistle to the Romans, "To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly his faith is counted for righteousness", and that will bring liberty.

"No more, my God, I boast no more
Of all the duties I have done;
I quit the hopes I held before
To trust the merits of thy Son".

O, here is liberty. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus".

"The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Saviour's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view".

And now, blessed with this spirit of liberty in Christ Jesus, the man is not for doing this or that that he may be worthy of the favour of God, but moved by principles of love and loyalty his desire is to walk in the way of God's precepts.

"What shall I do, was then the word,
That I may worthier grow?
What shall I render to the Lord
Is my enquiry now."

The man has not to do with the law written in tables of stone but he has to do with the law written in fleshy tables of the heart. "I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them". What he does now he does not from legal principles, but from gospel principles. He is now blessed with that living faith in Christ whereby he sees all that he needs for his acceptance with God, for his everlasting salvation, to be in Christ, and then that word comes with sweet weight, with a gracious authority into his heart and conscience, "I beseech you therefore,

brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service". O how attractive the ways of the Lord appear then, when under the influence of His mercy, of His constraining and enabling grace! Then you would be found in the way of obedience, and as one says, you would see the precepts turned into promises and have the promises turned into prayer in your heart. The apostle in writing to the Ephesians speaks like this, "ye are His workmanship", (it is all His doing) "created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them". Not slavish works, not legal exactions now, but works to which the man is constrained by the love of Christ. He would now yield himself unto God as those that are alive from the dead.

It is a wonderful thing to have such things as these written by the Spirit of the living God upon the heart, and to have that hunger and that thirst for conformity of heart and life to the image and Spirit of Jesus Christ, in other words, to be made "real Christians, washed in the Redeemer's blood"..... having "union with the Church's living Head". "Ye are our epistle", says the apostle, "written in our hearts, known and read of all men; forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart" "Sure, the plague is in my heart, else I could not act this part", and the remedy, to be an efficient remedy must reach the heart. The remedy must be applied to the heart; "Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me", said David.

"O send thy Spirit down to write
Thy law upon my heart.....
Let no corrupt design,
Nor covetous desires, arise
Within this soul of mine."

You see how the Apostle felt an assurance with regard to these people that it was so, and it is a wonderfully heartening sight for a minister of Jesus Christ when those who fear God walk in love to His name, and he sees clear evidences of a work of grace in any poor sinner's soul, when he sees a church of Jesus Christ, a gospel church, enriched with the graces of the Holy Spirit, so that the people walk together in love and in fellowship, "able also to admonish one another", seeking those things "wherewith one may edify another". "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity". Well, may the Lord make our hearts glad by such things as this among us here, and may He add His blessing.

FOR FURTHER COPIES please write to:

I. Fuller & Friends,
9 Sibella Road, London, SW4 6JA